

# **Audible.com and MP3 Player Final Report**

**9/1/01 to 3/1/02**

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Kalamazoo Public Library was the first library to offer digital audiobooks to its patrons, but we are no longer alone. A recent issue of *Library Hotline* announces other libraries that are currently using the Audible platform to circulate digital books; among them, King County Library System, WA; NOLA Regional Library System, Warren, OH; Broome County Public Library, NY; and the Carroll County Public Library, MD. Kalamazoo Public Library welcomes these innovators to the digital experiment! It is our hope that by working together we can chisel out a digital content provider model for public libraries that will be satisfactory for the library, our patrons, vendors, and copyright holders.

Our first and second quarter reports (on the KPL webpage at [www.kpl.gov/av/mp3info.htm](http://www.kpl.gov/av/mp3info.htm)) have experienced 779 and 208 respective hits since posting them in June and September 2001. The interest is evident. It may be too early to tell if this interest is substantive or only a mile wide and one inch deep. Many libraries experimented with e-books with less than overwhelming response, so a cautious attitude about investing in equipment that may or may not achieve popular use is understandable. The Kalamazoo Public Library feels this has been a highly successful experiment that needs to be pursued beyond the first year. We suspect that, if we can find a successful loan model, digital audiovisual will have a real future in public libraries. This report will summarize our experience and outline some of the issues we feel need to be addressed to keep libraries on the cutting edge of supplying digital content.

### **Customer demand and satisfaction**

Most of our audiobook patrons have migrated readily to the digital format and borrow the MP3 players to supplement our audiocassette and CD collection. (Approximately, 20% of patrons try the MP3 players and decide the experience is not for them, mainly because of sound quality and/or difficulty adapting to using the player.) They are especially happy to be able to get bestselling titles more quickly as we can usually purchase and offer these from Audible.com before our cassette and/or CD copies arrive from vendors and in advance of the arrival of print copies. We have encouraged patrons to browse Audible.com's holdings and request titles for purchase. In many cases, these purchases are made while patrons wait. Patrons across the board really appreciate the service and the novelty of having us procure a desired title while they wait. However, it has been our experience that only a few patrons really take the time to investigate Audible.com's holdings on their own. Although in our first year of service all titles purchased have been by patron request, we will move toward a part staff-selected, part patron-selected model for the second year.

Some of our visually impaired patrons have experimented with the players with mixed results. Because of the need to see the screen when making menu selections on the player, we have found that only visually impaired patrons who have sighted assistance available have been successful in using this format. Some elderly patrons have adapted well while others have difficulty with the size of the buttons and/or reading the rather small print on the display screen. We are using the Diamond Rio 500 players; other models may be more accommodating in these respects. Patrons who travel frequently love the portability and, other than some initial comments about sound quality, we have received no recent negative feedback about using the cassette adapter option in cars. (The fact that many new cars offer only CD players is of concern.)

### **Staff response**

The loss of digital material is non-existent and the processing costs are minimal. The audiovisual public service desk handles all purchases and transfers of titles and the circulation of the players. Once all staff gained enough experience to feel comfortable with these transactions, they have not added much of a burden to staff responsibilities. Considerable time is spent initiating new patrons into the use of the players and this sometimes places excessive demand on this busy service desk. It does provide, however, the opportunity to build rapport with the new user.

We would prefer not to be in the equipment loan business, although our first year of service has shown relatively few equipment problems. KPL asks for a credit card imprint to insure replacement costs if the MP3 players are not returned; although this policy has excluded a few patrons from borrowing because they lack credit cards, most patrons understand the policy and show no hesitation in providing us the information. No players have been lost thus far, and at \$1 a day overdue fines, very few players are returned late. We have had a few players whose screen has gone permanently blank (not a battery problem) and were sent a simple program from Audible.com to reprogram these players that promptly solved the problem. Other equipment problems we have encountered are patron loss of parts (padded protective cover for player), a broken set of headphones, and one player that malfunctioned and was replaced by Audible.

### **Other resources for further information**

There have been numerous articles in the library press regarding public libraries offering digital content from Audible.com. *Library Hotline*, *Today's Librarian*, *American Libraries*, *Public Libraries*, *NetConnect*, and *Library Journal* have all carried print information on the program. In addition, the Kalamazoo Gazette (our local newspaper) published several articles specifically about KPL's March 2001 inception of the MP3/digital book loan program.

Other libraries of varying size have contracted with Audible.com in the past year and are now offering (or are close to doing so) digital content. NOLA Regional Library System in Warren, OH is a consortium of 10 library systems that has a great web presence at [www.audible.nolanet.org](http://www.audible.nolanet.org). The King County Library System in WA recently purchase 500 players for their 42 branches; they call their digital audio program "eAudio" and their e-audio webpage can be visited at [www.kcls.org/eaudio/eaudiofaqs.html](http://www.kcls.org/eaudio/eaudiofaqs.html). The Broome County Public Library, NY and the Carroll County Public Library, MD are two other library systems currently providing, or soon to provide, digital content to their patrons.

### **Future developments**

It is desirable that some adaptation in the pricing model occur and we have initiated a dialogue with Audible.com about possibilities in this area. We need to implement a program that reflects better cost control. Currently, we pay five times the list price for a NYT bestseller, allowing the library five simultaneous circulations in perpetuity. Currently, demand does not support this level of expenditure. One possibility is paying the purchase price for a single copy plus a per/use fee. A variation of this would be for libraries to pay an annual fee to have access to Audible's platform containing a variety of digital data, then charge a per/use fee for each title accessed during that year. This would give patrons access to a broader range of titles without the need to actually purchase these titles. In our case, one of the advantages to this type of system is making it free to residents and charging a fee to reciprocal, non-resident borrowers.

Another concern is that many libraries do not want to get into the equipment purchasing/loaning business. Audible.com is working with us to find ways to help us eliminate or reduce dependence on loaned equipment. Perhaps an initiative could be introduced whereby library patrons who purchase a device from Audible.com could be authorized to receive downloads at both their home and the library. Perhaps we will burn CD or MP3 discs for patrons from Audible.com titles we access through an annually contracted platform fee. King County Library has discussed purchasing a specific number of Audible subscriptions that would be available to patrons until they are all claimed. They have also discussed allotting each patron a fixed number of uses per month and then negotiating a fixed price that would be paid Audible.com up front. Our discussion is currently at the stage where ideas are being tossed around; but the point is that Audible is very receptive to working with libraries to find a solution that works for all of us.

One of the biggest benefits Kalamazoo Public Library has derived from our foray into digital library offerings is an intangible one that has more to do with images than it does data. Because of our willingness to explore territory where “no library has gone before,” we have given our patrons and local community just one more reason to look to us for leadership. We are subtly crafting public conception of our space as one that is dynamic and responsive rather than static and outdated. This translates into the broader state and national arena as name recognition for a library from a not-so-big town that is forward-thinking and bold enough to experiment and then participate in a dialogue that will forge new roads for the library of the future.

This is an opportunity for libraries to be on the cutting edge. Only by experimentation and making our intentions known to industry content providers can we insure that we will be one of the leaders in determining how to provide digital content to the public. If libraries do not embrace digital downloads of audiovisual material, we are going to be left in the dust. It is our challenge to figure out reasonable loan patterns where vendors can make a profit, libraries are not left bankrupt, and our patrons get a product that enhances the services they receive.